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ABSTRACT

The historical background, principles, and practices of two major theories concerning student behavior are described. Theory A is religiously based and can be traced back to the biblical "Garden of Eden." It views human nature as fundamentally evil, the school as a means of both controlling and overcoming the child's innate propensities to wrong-doing, and school officials as morally qualified to be both examples to follow and determiners of reward and punishments for the students entrusted to their care. Theory B conceives human nature as essentially good. It views the school as means to direct that basic goodness and school officials as guides and friends of the students. The implications of each of these theories are examined in the context of overall attitudes toward the problem of student behavior, motives and goals of those responsible for student bahavior, value systems in use, the need for communication, degrees of freedom, theories of counseling, decision-making processes, uses of records and resources, and policies and law. (RM)

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TOWARDS A THEORETICAL BASIS FOR PROGRAMS OF STUDENT BEHAVIOR

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INTRODUCTION

There are two major and opposing conceptions relative to the problems of student behavior in the nation's schools. Theory A views human nature as fundamentally evil, the school and certain other institutions as the means of both controlling and eventually overcoming those innate propensities to wrong doing, and officials in charge of the process as morally qualified to be both examples to follow and determiners of rewards and punishments for the students entrusted to their care. By description, Theory A may be termed traditional, punitive, adult-centered, and it is usually religiously based.

Theory B corceives of human nature as essentially good, the school and other institutions of society as means to direct that basic goodness, and the officials as guides and friends of the students concerned. This view may be

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described as progressive, student-centered, liberal, and it is usually secular in its rationale.

This writing is concerned with the historical background underlying these theories and with consequent principles and practices for improving student behavior.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Theory A was described as religiously based and it can be traced back, without overstatement, to the Biblical Garden of Eden. Here, Eve partook of the forbidden fruit, gave to Adam who also ate, and thus, together they violated a divine commandment. The principle of sin, singular, entered the human race with that act, and now every son and daughter of Adam is born innately evil. The sin for which no one is personally responsible is passed on from generation to generation so that all youth are viewed as tending constantly toward evil. This doctrine of innate depravity parallels the Aristotelian theory which holds that universal concepts, such as evil, are somehow embedded in their corresponding objects.

The great Saint Augustine, bishop of Hippo in the fourth century A.D., offered support for the literal interpretation of the story of the fall of man in the Book of Genesis. Following the philosophy of the Neo-Platonists of his time, Augustine maintained that man did, indeed, suffer from original sin and was thus alienated from God.[1] Saint Augustine set the frame of Christian theology, at least for one major branch, that of Calvinism, for the Middle Ages and beyond.[2] John Calvin of the 1500's adopted from Saint Augustine the notion of natural depravity and that doctrine permeated his entire structure of theology and his goals for the education of the young.[3]

Calvinism received some support and a milder interpretation on the part of

the great Scottish reformer, John Knox (1505-1572), and later became a prominent doctrine among the Puritans who settled America in the 1600's.[4] Puritan Calvinism was ably promoted by the great American preacher, Jonathan Edwards, as can be seen in his famous sermon, "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God." As a result, Calvinism became the basis in the New World, not only for religious beliefs and for government, but also for education in the home and in the schoolhouse. The Massachusetts Law of 1647 was called, with reason, the "Ould Deluder Satan Law" and purposed, through education, to save youngsters from their evil selves and the devil, too. With the aid of the home, the church, and government, the school was to break the will and force children into subjection. Any rebellion on the part of the child to that process only confirmed the opinion of the adults in charge that children were evil by nature. Schools were, therefore, not very pleasant places. Play was regarded as a waste of time, discipline was the key word, and even the use of the tuning fork in school was thought to be a device of Satan to lure youth into wrong doing.[5] Such practices clearly resulted from the view that children were innately bad, and both the theory and some of the practice continue to affect American education into the modern day.

Theory B maintains that children are born good and rejects the Calvinistic doctrine of total depravity. One noted thinker whose position may well have been a stepping store from the notion of total depravity to that of innate goodness was the Dutch theologian John Arminius (1560-1609). Arminius modified Calvinistic doctrines, especially the doctrine of evil. In place of total depravity he held to partial depravity in that every child is affected by evil but none were without some redeeming characteristics. Another mid-step was provided by the noted Britist philoscpher, John Locke (1632-1704).

Locke suggested that the child was born neutral, that is neither evil or good by nature. According to Locke, the mind at birth is a "tabula rasa" or blank tablet.[6]

The American philosopher, John Dewey (1859-1952), moved the theory of education away from religious and theological controversies over the nature of man. He assumed that the child was good and, therefore, should be the center of the educative process. The learning program, under Dewey's Progressivism, would be developed by the teacher and students together and would make the goals, abilities, and the interests of the students the determining factors in the planning process. It is clear that this theory leads to a high degree of freedom for the pupils. In fact, Dewey himself stated that some Progressive teachers may have carried the notion of freedom and liberty too far and permitted children to develop traits of cockiness, impertinence, and egotism.[8] Nevertheless, the view that children are basically good has largely supplanted that of Saint Augustine and become woven into American educational practice.

If the theory underlying rules and programs concerned with student behavior can logically be separated into major types as has been done here, then what are the implications of each of these positions? To respond to that question, points of reference have been selected and the relationship of each theory to those points has been described.

OVERALL ATTITUDE TOWARD THE PROBLEM OF STUDENT BEHAVIOR

The view which holds youth to be innately good would make for a positive attitude toward their needs and problems in contrast to the negative attitude of supporters of inborn evil in all children. Further, there would be the consequent contrast of sensitivity to others versus calloused rigidity and

and strict adherence to fixed rules. Theory B would be more inclined to aid, protect, and understand than Theory A. In addition, the overall view of Theory B would include more than just the school situation but also the relationship of the home and total community to the problems of student behavior.

MOTIVES AND GOALS OF THOSE RESPONSIBLE FOR STUDENT BEHAVIOR

The major purpose of schools in the American community is to transmit the culture; that is, schooling is primarily a learning program. That goal includes not only the imparting of subject matter, but also the development of mature attitudes and adjustment in practice to adult ways of living. The final goal may well be proper alignment to life at its best and consequent happiness. Theory A would seek to accomplish these goals by mandates and through punishment, and expect, in the extreme, overnight perfection. Theory B would plan for gradual improvement aimed at adjustment and rehabilitation.

THE PLACE OF THE VALUE SYSTEM

Everyone possesses some sort of value system, and traditionalists are prone to impose theirs on other people, as in the case of school authorities on the youth in their charge. Theory B, in contrast to Theory A, would provide an atmosphere in which students feel free and unthreatened by the changes brought about by themselves and in their values. The good is promoted, not demanded, and necessary treatment reaches the causes not the symptoms. Theory B attempts to be preventive rather than punitive.

THE NEED FOR COMMUNICATION

Generally, communication is thought of as either totally open, as under Theory B, or quite closed as Theory A. Closed communication permits certain

officials to dominate each incident and to prevent student expression. Most youth, more than almost anything else, need someone to listen to them, which is more apt to happen under the liberal view.

DEGREE OF FREEDOM

Theory A tends to bestow considerable freedom on the authorities in charge, often at the expense of the students. Fortunately, the courts in recent years have held that students have both the right to exercise certain freedoms, such as the right to self-expression, and consequent responsibilities. In fact, from a philosophic point of view, the degree of responsibility which can be expected from any individual is directly correlated with the degree of freedom allowed. Responsibility increases or is lessened based on the amount of freedom. Theory B would promote relative, not absolute, freedom and is thus Progressive but not Existential.

THEORY OF COUNSELING

School programs concerned with student behavior involve considerable face-to-face contact between officials and the students. Theory A would assume that the adults have most, if not all, of the answers and that, in turn, would result in their telling others what to do. Theory B is more non-directive, or client-centered, and holds that the advisee has within himself the answers to his own problems. The latter promotes advocacy not accusation.

THE DECISION-MAKING PROCESS

When students misbehave, decisions for the good of all must eventually be made. Theory A presumes decision-making to be an official obligation, while the more liberal approach sees decision-making as a shared function. Theory B would involve in the process not only school officials but also the students themselves, parents, and skilled professionals as needed. The inclusion of

students is especially important since their involvement in the decision-making process generates a sense of responsibility for themselves and for their school.

USE OF RECORDS AND RESOURCES

Records are often kept by traditional school officials as a means of defense for them against any challenge to their decisions or authority. Theory B would see records as a basis for helping students and as a measure of the progress toward responsible adult behavior.

The resources of the community, including both human service centers and skilled advisers are seen by advocates of Theory B not as support for themselves, but as aids to those who need help in adjusting their behavior to the accepted norms of society.

POLICIES AND LAW

Theory A would tend to impose adult-developed policies on students without involving members of the student body in the development of those rules and regulations. In contrast, the more liberal view would require considerable involvement of numerous parties. Of course, the law requires that with major disciplinary problems, school officials must follow due process and that includes a hearing at which the attendance of all concerned is expected. However, the courts have always been quite reluctant to intrude into academia, leaving the school officials to operate their own little city-states.

In actual practice few if any school authorities subscribe totally to Theory A or to Theory B. Most, if not all, are eclectic, even to the point of holding contrary principles or employing contrary practices. There are obviously educators, both teachers and administrators, who voice approval of John Calvin's views on Sunday and practice John Dewey's throughout the week.

To develop some awareness of the contraditions is one of the purposes of this paper. There is no expectation of any sudden renouncing of previous beliefs or ways of doing. Perhaps a gradual growing toward a defensible position and a deeper understanding of the problem of student behavior constitute the most valuable goals afterall.

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